

Zizek in Manhattan: An intellectual charlatan masquerading as “left”

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The Slovenian academic and author Slavoj Žižek spoke before a full house at Cooper Union’s Great Hall in Manhattan Monday, delivering a 90-minute monologue that wandered frenetically between complacent observations about the wave of austerity measures sweeping Europe, warnings of ecological catastrophes and digressions into his particular interests in the sado-pornographic facets of popular culture.

Žižek has been hailed as one of the world’s greatest public intellectuals, a leading postmodern, or “post-Marxist” philosopher and an “Elvis of cultural theory.” He is sought after for visiting faculty positions in both Europe and the US and has a loyal following, particularly among a layer of academics and would-be academics who were well represented in his largely homogenous New York City audience.

This narrow social layer is Žižek’s universe and his comic spiels are tailored to provoke, titillate and amuse them.

Philosophically, Žižek is not an original or innovative thinker. While one academic commentator has claimed that Hegel and Marx are among his core influences, that is a false genealogy.

Žižek is an outgrowth of a reactionary anti-Marxist and anti-materialist tradition that descends from the irrationalism of Schelling, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger. He eclectically draws on the neo-Nietzschean and neo-Heideggerian thought of 1960s French post-structuralism, having adopted the ideas of its leading intellectuals—especially the post-Heideggerian psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan—when he was a graduate student.

Many of the French post-structuralists were fellow-travelers of Stalinism or Maoism (e.g., Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, Guattari and Kristeva) and it is not surprising that Žižek has occasionally said positive things about the Soviet and Chinese dictators.

Žižek is also known to call himself a “good Stalinist”, and there is reason to believe that he fancies himself a petty Stalin, going so far as he sometimes does to adopt Stalin’s habit of clapping for himself with an audience. Žižek will follow up excitedly telling his listeners who his role model is.

Besides irrationalism, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, a more recent influence on Žižek has been the septuagenarian French philosopher Alain Badiou, an admirer of Mao, who advocates the petty-bourgeois concept of “politics without party” and maintains the voluntarist notion that “we must go from politics to economy and never from economy to politics.”[1]

Žižek has expressed similar-sounding ideas and also adopts Badiou’s mystical concept of the Event—a self-relating and self-inclusive phenomenon that appears to those who see themselves in its call, as it is characterized in Žižek’s *The Parallax View*

(2009).[2] Badiou and Žižek do, however, have philosophical differences, but these have not been so significant as to compromise their friendship or Žižek’s promotion of Badiou.

As with the post-structuralists and the post-Maoists, Žižek is a political opportunist, though crasser and ruder. Despite all the radical-sounding bluster he pumps off, when it comes down to real politics, not the political phantoms in his brain, his positions end up serving interests that are completely hostile to the international working class and to genuine socialism.

Žižek has a political history as a founder and candidate of Slovenia’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDS), which oversaw the reorganization of the former Yugoslav Republic along free market capitalist lines. He is also on record as promoting illusions in Obama’s candidacy and victory in the US presidential election of 2008, which followed a campaign based on mass deception.

This intellectual and political background was clearly manifested at the Cooper Union lecture. As a speaker, Žižek was both distracting and distracted. A seething collection of obsessive-compulsive tics, he rarely completed a sentence or fragment of a thought without wiping his nose and then running his fingers through his hair or tugging on his ill-fitting T-shirt. His slovenly appearance, clownish asides and rapid-fire standup comic delivery compelled him to repeatedly employ the phrase, “This is not a joke.”

The appearance in New York City was part of a long-running worldwide tour to promote his latest book, *Living in the End Times*, a 402-page collection of random observations that range from his assertion that “the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point” to his demand that Marx’s understanding of capitalist exploitation be “radically rethought” based upon the supposed new “hegemonic” position of intellectual labor. Thrown in for good measure were ruminations on the film *Avatar* and an analysis of the animated film *Kung Fu Panda* as an illustration of the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan.

A self-styled scholar of Hegel, Žižek expressed his supposed command of dialectics by continuously elucidating largely commonplace “paradoxes” and “ironies” in present-day ideology and culture.

Žižek has a semi-adolescent need to shock. He knows his own milieu of postmodernist academics and endeavors to scandalize them by pointing out the absurdities and contradictions in their thinking and through a facile mocking of “political correctness.”

While he poses as an advocate of “communism,” he hastens to make clear that his communism has nothing to do with the struggles of the 20th century, or for that matter, those of the working class. Things, for him boil down in the end to little more than a plea for reasonableness, civility and social harmony.

This is hardly a surprise, given that ??Zizek has endorsed such platitudes as Derrida's long and distant "democracy-to-come" over the unified struggle of the working class to abolish capitalism and war.

"Today, the impossible and the possible are exploding into excess," he speciously told his audience, pointing to the gap between the ever-widening realm of what can be obtained by the wealthy individual and the steadily shrinking services on offer to society as a whole.

Recycling his repertoire of sexual jokes, he said, "I am told that here in New York a man can have his penis cut in two ... so you can do it with two women. You can achieve immortality. You can go into space. But maintaining a little bit of health care is impossible." He suggested the need "to rearrange our priorities a little bit."

This was followed by a digression on computer dating as a form of "self-commodification," evoking only scattered laughter from his audience.

He largely gave a pass to US imperialism in the lecture, treating militarism and the war in Afghanistan as sadly mistaken policies and insisting that "when you have a crisis, it is not automatically the US that is the bad guy."

??Zizek gave his preference for the TV series *24* —also a favorite of Dick Cheney—over "moralistic Hollywood" because of its illustration of irresolvable "ethical political contradictions," and he warned his audience he would "shock you even further" by admitting that he himself could be induced to torture if his child were in the hands of terrorists. "The obscenity is when we normalize it," he said, suggesting that under extreme conditions—which have been invoked continuously since 9/11—it may be unavoidable.

He taunted his fellow "left" professors for preferring that revolutions take place "at a safe distance—Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela—so that, while my heart is warmed by faraway events, I can go about promoting my academic careers." Now, however, he warned, the crisis of capitalism would confront them with "real change."

But the nature of this "real change" was abstract and disembodied in ??Zizek's lecture. Coming from Europe, he made no reference to the mass strikes in France and the growing social struggles that are erupting throughout the continent.

Indeed, the working class does not exist in ??Zizek's conceptual universe. At one point, he referred lackadaisically to the "millions of innocent bystanders" who "suffer the consequences" of capitalism's crisis.

??Zizek's greatest concern was ecological disasters. He expressed his disappointment in Obama's "naïve" handling of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, suggesting that the government should have mobilized the military and gone beyond demanding that the company pay reparations to ensure that no company could do the same thing again.

He also predicted that climate change or other catastrophes would force mass transfers of populations. "How will we organize this?" he asked, pointing out that such transfers in earlier periods had been accompanied by wars and mass slaughter. "National sovereignty will have to be radically redefined." Who will do this and how was left in the dark.

??Zizek's conclusion was that "we have to get ready for the moment when we have to invent new social forms." He stressed that this involved being "very creative" and seeking change of an "essentialist nature," but offered no clue as to what any of this meant in terms of a program.

He drew a Chinese wall between the 20th and 21st centuries, insisting that the so-called "left" faced the opposite situation today than it did

before the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracies.

In the previous period, he said, the left "knew what had to be done"—the socialist revolution—but had to wait for the right conditions to carry it out. Today, he insisted, "we do not know what we have to do, but we have to act now, because not to act would mean catastrophe." What should be done? ??Zizek allowed that he had no program. "There are no easy, clear solutions," he said.

In a brief question and answer period, the Slovenian academic elaborated on his invocation of "communism." He disavowed revolution, telling his audience to "get rid of the idea of a Leninist party taking power."

Instead, he stated that his "communism" could take many forms. By illustration, he cited the 1990s "solidarity pact" entered into by the unions, corporations and government in Norway that limited wage increases in the expectation that it would make Norwegian capitalism more competitive and create jobs. "It worked," he said.

"You just do everything possible, that's my view," he concluded. To accuse him of one moment invoking "radical revolution" and the next corporatist collaboration, he claimed, was like saying, "Today, I saw you eating chicken teriyaki and yesterday it was pizza."

That this kind of puerile thinking is celebrated in the universities and among a layer of semi-intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic is testimony to the deep-going crisis of bourgeois ideology.

In his lecture, ??Zizek dropped the names not only of fellow academics, such as Fredric Jameson and Alain Badiou, but also that of Alex Callinicos, leader of the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP), with whom he appeared at the SWP-sponsored "Marxism 2010" earlier this year. Present at the Cooper Union lecture was Haymarket Books, the publishing arm of the International Socialist Organization.

That a charlatan and anti-Marxist like ??Zizek is promoted as an important philosopher by a whole range of ex-radicals is a troubling symptom of the deep intellectual and political disorientation of this social milieu.

[1] See Badiou's "On the Idea of Communism" (YouTube video) [back]

[2] See ??Zizek's *The Parallax View* (See on Google Books.) [back]



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